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ABSTRACT

To address the confusion and concern surrounding the issue of literacy in the United States, this article outlines the history of literacy development in this country (tracing the growth of literacy, methods of estimating population literacy, and changing definitions of literacy), assesses the present scene, and draws implications for schooling today and in the immediate future. (SR)

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Literacy: A Historical Perspective and Today's Reality

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Many mixed signals bombard the American people concerning the status of literacy and of education in our society. Newspapers on September 22, 1988 headlined our educational achievements with front page stories of a Census Bureau Study showing that three quarters of our people 25 years old and over have completed high school and nearly one out of five has completed four years of college.

A month earlier as part of a national newspaper literacy campaign headlines read "U.S. Illiteracy: A Nation Remains at Risk." The nationally distributed article quotes extensively from Kozol's book, Illiterate America and concludes that 60 million adults representing more than a third of our adult population "read only at a level that is less than equal to the full survival needs of our society"—whatever that really means.

Where is the truth—the reality? Have we become a nation of illiterates ill-equipped to compete on a global basis? Or are we an increasingly better educated society increasingly able to compete in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex workplace? Schools, students, and teachers are easy targets when a society is faced with serious problems. It was this kind of a situation that lead Arthur Gates in an address to a national conference on measurement in 1937 to start his address with the comment—"Fellow teachers I am here to

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assure you that we are not responsible for the Great Depression."

The confusion and concern about literacy is not unique to the United States. 1990 has been designated as International Literacy Year. UNESCO has also issued a radio program for use on International Literacy Day, September 8 on the topic "A Look at Functional Literacy in Industrialized Countries" which clearly indicates the U.S. experience is a more general one.

To react to the question, "Where is the truth?" regarding literacy today, I would like to first, outline the history of literacy development in our nation. Second, I will try to assess the present scene—a tentative statement to be sure but the facts are elusive. Third, will be a response to the question—"What are the implications of all this for schooling today and the immediate future.

Our Literacy Heritage.

Many people have the impression that there was a golden age of literacy in our country that has deteriorated over time. Not so. Rather such thinking reflects the human tendency of putting a halo on the past. If there is to be a golden age it is still to come. Much of the following data is based upon Wanda Cook's IRA publication Adult Literacy Education in the United States, conversations with Ralph Tyler, and personal analysis of census and other data.

Ralph Tyler pointed out that according to the best estimates available, the level of literacy in this nation at the time of its independence was a mere 15 percent. This figure surprises many people who read the eloquent documents and speeches of the political

leaders of that day. But the tradesmen, farmers, and frontiersmen had little need to read and did not. By the time of the War Between the States this percentage had grown to a mere 28 percent. Two factors are largely overlooked in assessing our literacy history. For a major part of our history we were primarily an agricultural nation with vast, remote rural areas where opportunities for schooling were limited, and secondly, a sizeable proportion of our population was not permitted the privilege of literacy because they were not free people. The obvious truth is that we still have not totally overcome the effects of this systematic bias which followed blacks as they moved from rural to urban areas.

It was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that literacy as such became an issue in this country. And the reason it did become an issue was not at all related to today's concerns. The turn of the century was a period of heavy immigration and the new immigrants were met with suspicion and disdain. People wondered, "Who are these hoards with their strange clothes, language, and manners?" Groups such as the Immigration Restriction League were formed which, among other things, proposed literacy tests to restrict immigration especially from eastern and southern Europe and Asia. Henry Cabot Lodge, a leader in this movement, proposed a bill in Congress in 1896, which was passed but vetoed by President Cleveland, according to which only those who could read and write their own or some other language would be admitted. Lodge was frank to say that such tests would "bear most heavily upon the Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, and Asiatics, and very lightly, or not at

all, upon English speaking immigrants, or Germans, Scandinavians, and French." According to Lodge, "the mental and moral qualities which make what we call our race would be preserved only by excluding the wholesale infusion of races whose traditions and inheritances, whose thoughts and beliefs are wholly alien to ours and with whom we have never assimilated or even been associated in the past." Like bills were passed by Congress in 1901 and 1915 and likewise were vetoed. This was a period when there was no real enforcement of attendance laws (in those days you did not compel Americans to do anything) and the idea of intervention programs to do something about illiteracy had little or no support. The public generally was unconcerned.

The nation was growing rapidly, becoming more industrialized, and an interest in literacy and schooling was growing—albeit but slowly. The 1900 census asked the question for each person age ten and over, "Can this person read and write?" On the basis of a yes or no response the country was officially listed as 89.3 percent literate. In 1900 six percent of the 17-year-olds went on to complete high school.

The next decade (1910-1920) witnessed continued strong feelings against the foreign born and the first World War. The 1910 census reported a 92.3 percent literacy level based upon the same question asked in 1900. The decade also experienced another three percent increase to nine percent of the 17-year-olds who went on to complete high school. For the first time some concern appeared for the native born illiterates but no state initiated programs to help them. The military draft of 1916 brought a shock to the nation by revealing

that 25 percent of the draftees could not read a newspaper or write a simple sentence. The Army draft tested a select group of men—the young with the most recent schooling. For the first time a functional criterion was applied and obviously the functional literacy level of the total adult population was much lower than that of the draftees.

The war ended but not the interest in literacy. The 1920 census, again using the same definition used previously, "Can this person read and write?", reported the nation was 94 percent literate. That year 17 percent of the 17-year-olds went on to complete high school. The Army experience led to the establishment of illiteracy commissions in several states. In 1921 Maine and North Dakota passed legislation and organized programs to abolish illiteracy. In 1922 ten additional states passed such legislation. In 1924 a National Literacy Conference was held in Washington and a National Literacy Crusade was conducted with some success. In the same year the Sterling-Reed Bill was introduced into Congress. This bill sought to establish a Department of Education which, among other things, was to research illiteracy. Section seven of the bill read: "In order to encourage the states to remove illiteracy, \$7,500,000, or so much thereof as may be necessary, is authorized to be appropriated annually for the instruction of illiterates 14 years of age and older." Section eight provided an additional \$7,500,000 for Americanization programs to teach immigrants to read and speak English. The bill did not pass but interestingly proposed a larger budget than the Right to Read effort received when it was funded 45

years later. The concern for literacy continued and in 1929 President Hoover appointed an Advisory Committee on National Illiteracy. The idea was a good one but the timing was poor. The stock market crash and the subsequent depression drove illiteracy concerns into the background.

The 1930's was the age of the New Deal in America. The 1930 census using the same definition used since 1900 reported that the nation was 95.7 literate. The percent of 17-year-olds completing high school increased by 12 percent to 29 percent. This census reported additional literacy data. The illiteracy rate over the decade dropped from 4.0 to 2.7 percent for whites, from 23 to 16 percent for blacks, and from 13 to ten percent for foreign born. During this decade studies of illiteracy were undertaken including its relationship to crime. WPA writing projects developed new instructional materials and special experimental programs were undertaken. However, the national effort to deal with illiteracy that was emerging in the mid-20's did not reappear.

The 1940's brought a new crisis situation. The 1940 census did not report literacy data. However, it was estimated that the level of literacy, using the previous definition was 97.1 percent. For the first time over half (51 percent) of the 17-year-olds completed high school—the marked increase was a function of the great depression. In 1947 the Census collected specific literacy information using as the definition of literate all people 14 and older who had completed five or more years of schooling. Three million percent people over the age of 14 had had no schooling and 11.5 million had had less than

five years. To grasp the significant of these numbers and using 1940 as the base year the number of functionally illiterate adults in this country was greater than the combined adult population of the 14 western states: California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming, Colorado, North and South Dakota and Nebraska. And remember this was a very low level of functional literacy as defined by today's standards.

Once more the Army draft revealed the low level of functional literacy in the country. In May, 1941 an Army directive was issued to reject all men who could not pass a test of fourth grade reading difficulty. In the first six weeks over 50,000 men were rejected. By March, 1942 the equivalent of 29 infantry divisions of 433,000 men were refused induction on the basis of illiteracy. The Army could not tolerate this loss of manpower and the rule was changed. Illiterates were drafted and assigned to Specialized Training Units (STU's) that had been organized by Paul Witty of Northwestern University to provide literacy training together with the Army's basic training. The Army screened its ranks for rural school teachers who were then assigned to Witty's units. By 1944 men who failed Witty's program were kept in the Army and were assigned to non-combat duty as laborers. In the World War II draft 38 out of 1,000 White and 112 of 1,000 Black drafters were rejected as illiterate.

I had my first experience with the literacy problem when assigned to the Psychological Testing Unit at Fort Snelling, Minnesota in 1943. For the most part the illiterate recruits came

from remote rural areas.

The 1950 census broadened the definition of literacy to include five years of schooling and the ability to read and write for all those over age 14. On this basis, the nation's literacy level was listed as 96.8 percent. By 1950 essentially three out of five (59 percent) of 17-year-olds completed high school. But once again history repeated itself. In the Korean War draft 3000,000 men were rejected the first year for what was now called "educational reasons." The proportion of rejectees varied widely across the country. The national rejection rate was 19.2 percent ranging from 58 percent in South Carolina to a low of five to seven percent for Minnesota, the Dakotas and Montana. The manpower resources of the nation were so low that not only the Army but the Navy as well had to accept illiterate recruits and provide special training for them. Indiana University received a contract from the Navy to assist with the development and evaluation of its literacy programs. In 1952 and 53 I had my second encounter with the nation's literacy problem by serving as a consultant with the Navy working at its three basic training centers—San Diego, Bainbridge, and Great Lakes. The Navy's selection process took men with potential (average non-verbal IQ 101) and its special training programs enjoyed a high degree of success.

The Census of 1960 did not contain direct literacy data. If the schooling definition were used it is estimated that the nation was 98.1 percent literate. Of greater concern was the definition of functional literacy. by 1960, 65 percent of 17-year-olds were completing high school and at the same time the population growth was

such that the actual number of functional illiterates increased somewhat. The movement of people from rural to urban areas also had a significant impact on both statistics and programs. The new draft laws kept the military in the business of literacy training. In 1966 the military undertook project 100,000 with the goal of training 100,000 functional illiterates annually. The Census Bureau conducted a special study in 1969 and reported that 99 percent of the population 14 years of age and older could read and write a simple message in English or another language. This became the official statistic of the 1970's. In 1970, 76 percent of 17-year-olds completed high school and 31 percent of the 1972 graduates completed a bachelor's degree in 1976. An additional 30 percent continued their education beyond high school in one form or another. If the age group were expanded from 17 to 26, 84 percent completed high school or a high school equivalency (e.g., GED).

The Present Scenario.

Through the 1980's these percentages have gradually increased. The record is clear that as a nation we have achieved ever increasing levels of literacy of our people. In their report, Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults (Ages 21-25) (NAEP, 1986), Hirsch and Jungeblut observe that "although some of our citizens reach adulthood unable to read and write, we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history" (p. 63). The effect of changing standards over time is revealing. Virtually all young adults meet the standards of 100 years ago of being able to read and write their own name. About 95 percent reach or surpass the

fourth grade standard set by the military in the 1940's. Compared to in-school students, more than 80 percent of young adults read as well as or better than the average eighth grader and more than 60 percent equal or surpass the average eleventh grade student. Improvement is obvious but is it good enough in a technologically advanced society? As Mikulecky (Status of Literacy in Our Society, 1986) observes "there is more than one literacy problem in the United States." The problem meeting the most media attention is the painful problem of the small percentage of adults who can barely read or write. A much larger and different problem relates to the millions of adults who can read and write, but not well enough to meet the increasing literacy demands for attaining a comfortable living in the United States. Confusion of these two aspects of literacy problems and the fact that these problems need to be addressed using different methods has led to a number of embarrassing misunderstandings.

Obtaining and maintaining literacy is now a never-ending goal—(Hirsch and Jungeblut, p. 67), "a life time pursuit, as in sustaining good health. Both are complex and depend upon a number of factors. Just as there is no single action or step that will ensure good health for everyone, there is no single action or step that will ensure that every individual will become fully literate."

Implications for Schooling.

In a nutshell, the present scene is one of increasing individual competence in the face of increasing demands in the workplace. What does this mean for us in the nation's classrooms as we prepare the next generation to enter the workforce?

First, we need to have a clear understanding of what we want to achieve in literacy development. Literacy consists basically of two dimensions: knowledge, the background that provides the basis for understanding, i.e., the world knowledge of Jeanm Chall or the cultural literacy of E. D. Hirsch, and skill in using the reading process itself. The product of this combination is comprehension.

Second, literacy is enhanced by extensive reading and active learning. In the real world of work people read to do or accomplish something. Likewise in the classroom we need to get beyond reading just to read to further action based upon the content of what is read. This can take many forms—dramatization, writing, reporting, interpreting in art forms, etc.

Third, we need to be aware of the affective impact created by the sense of accomplishment of successfully facing challenging tasks.

Fourth, we need to set goals and expectations for students including that of assuming responsibility for their own learning. Our responsibility is to create the best opportunity for learning to take place. But we can not learn for our students—that is their responsibility. Arthur Gates long ago suggested that responsibility for learning was both one of the most critical and one of the most important factors in making a breakthrough in high school achievement.

Fifth, provide opportunities to work on projects in groups as well as individuals. In most work situations reading and problem solving involve more than a single individual.

Sixth, students need to develop an early understanding and

appreciation of the role of reading in the workplace. Recent research with tenth and eleventh grade students suggests that they have little understanding of what is now required in the workplace.

This list could be extended substantially. The challenge is obvious and as in the past this generation of students and teachers will rise to the challenge for as Walt Whitman wrote many years ago—

And you America

Cast you the real reckoning for your present?

The lights and shadows of your future, good or evil?

To girlhood, boyhood look, the teacher and the school.

Leaves of Grass